News From Somewhere

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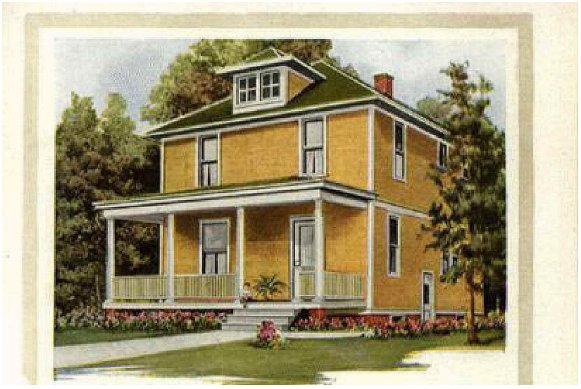
The Alphistian Home



As a college student at the University of Kentucky in the late 1970s, I lived in a Sears mail order kit house, known as a Four Square. It was dilapidated and owned by the university, and as a result really cheap. I have happy memories from living there back in the day.

Where I have lived since has impacted how I feel about housing in Alphistia. Thirty years in New York did not endear me to the Park Avenue example of poorly designed “mansions in the sky”. Block after block of 20 story boxes, most with no views, no direct sunlight, no balconies. The poorer folk would pay exorbitant rents to live in tenements with even worse design elsewhere. I was happy to leave it all behind in 2010.

I like the traditional old college town neighborhoods where I lived in Lexington KY, and where I live now in Champaign IL. They were “streetcar suburbs”, human-scaled with well-built homes and smaller apartment houses. Lots of trees, and often well-landscaped gardens. Many with lawns, but not the banal, overly manicured Stepford Housewife model of postwar American dystopia.

I also admire the social housing traditions of Sweden, the housing complexes built by the Social Democrats who ruled in Vienna in the 1920s, and the Dutch model from the 1930s through the 1960s. They provided affordable mass housing that was by and large well-designed and of very good quality.

Most of Alphistia’s housing would be built and run by non-profit cooperatives. Rents would be fixed at no more than 25% of household income. Homes would be designed with the idea that these are not profit sources for speculators, but places where people want to live, and can afford to.

There would not be McMansions, or even very many mansions (really none at all). There would be houses for those with more money than most that would be very comfortable, privately owned and built. Some of these villas would be inspired by

Four Square homes, but would run the gamut of what people want and could afford.

As the founder of Alphistia, I would earn a house inspired by the Four Square I lived in on Linden Walk many years ago, but modified a little bit for convenience due to my age. I would live on the first level, and there would be guestrooms and accommodations for a caretaker or two on the second floor. After all, in any future scenario I might imagine I will continue to be elderly…

Alphistia's towns would not be very large (Enteve would have 100,000 people but most others would be under 10,000). However, all of them would be designed as pedestrian-oriented, and most definitely not with motor vehicles as anything more than an afterthought in daily life. There would be some highrise apartment towers, but these would mostly be lived in by single people, young people just starting out, or older people who don't need a big space for a family. Most apartment houses would be of just two or three stories, in small complexes often known as "garden apartments".

The most common building would be "The Quad", small buildings with just four apartments. In the college town where I have lived for more than 10 years now, there are several dozen buildings around town like this. They usually have more than just four apartments though (10 to 12 is more common, as there are apartments on three levels. They are handsome limestone buildings constructed in the 1950s and were primarily built for young grad student couples or people right out of college.

The Alphistian version would provide communal services (storage, utilities, a laundry room in the basement) and two apartments per floor upstairs. Each would be about 750 square feet (about 70 square meters). They would have two bedrooms, a kitchen with dining area, a spacious living room, a bathroom with tub and room for a washing machine, built-in closets, and a balcony. Most Alphistian households would be small - usually no more than four people and mostly one, two, or three people. These apartments could accommodate a large part of the population. They would be grouped in well-landscaped areas near local shopping and access to the transit system.

There would be some row houses for families as well with living room, dining area and kitchen downstairs, and three bedrooms upstairs, and a backyard. Most of these would be in the smaller towns or in the farming villages.

There would be more than just a few building prototypes of course. What would be avoided would be sprawl, and its opposite: canyons of tower blocks. Instead, people would live in pleasant homes in pleasant neighborhoods, in pleasant towns.

In Enteve there would be one-off buildings facing the Sioto River and Lake Sioto, featuring beautiful views. These would be somewhat larger buildings than the norm with three or four stories. The unfortunate Upper East Side rabbit warrens for the rich in NYC would be unknown in Alphistia though, much less the overcrowded apartments without light and air where so many in the Outer Boroughs

are forced to subsist. The endless car-reliant suburbs that blight most of the cities in the US would be impossible…they just would not exist.

Gezellig

Very early in the morning after Christmas Day in 1984, I arrived at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport. I had just graduated from library school the week before, and I had just accepted a librarian's job to start right after the New Year. I was traveling to Europe for the first time, and got a super cheap fare by flying right on Christmas Day.

It didn't take long for me to realize that Amsterdam was absolutely nothing like Manhattan! I stored my suitcase in a storage locker at Amsterdam's main train station and went for a very long walk through the almost empty city. I was immediately struck by how human-scaled it all seemed. It was built along canals, with narrow streets. It was not meant for cars, and they were not omnipresent. Some were parked along the streets and the canals, but not many. It was clear that people got around by bicycle, walking, or taking the trams.

Dutch cities old and new keep in mind that they are primarily meant for living in without a car. Plenty of people do have them, and many need them to commute to jobs outside the areas or towns where they live. But a great many people bicycle to work or school, or take a bus, tram, or train. That's normal everywhere in the country.

New York is actually more dense than Amsterdam, but "planned" very differently. It has the biggest subway system in America, but many still rely on cars to get around, or especially to get in and out of the city. Dutch towns are densely built-up, but usually low rise with a tower block here and there. It's by design. Most live in rowhouses.

The result is a more humane environment, and after a week in the Netherlands, and many visits in years afterward, I learned about the Dutch concept of "gezelligheid". If something is "gezellig", it's basically cozy, or nice, or sociable, and generally it has to be in a Dutch environment to pull that off. When abroad, Dutch people will say: "oh this is gezellig"...when something reminds them of the atmosphere at home. In essence, being Dutch and being in Holland creates a gezellig possibility almost everywhere.

I certainly know America has very little that is gezellig about it. Inside my home it's rather cozy and nice, because I've made it that way. Champaign-Urbana has some parts of town that hint of gezelligheid, especially the University campus and some of the older neighorhoods. Most of the rest of CU is just ordinary suburban sprawl you can find anywhere in the US, and there is nothing cozy about that! It's not humane…

it's boring, ugly, very poorly planned, and dehumanizing.

Every Friday, Vanya drives me out to the rather horrid Big Box shopping area on the north side of Champaign to get food. It's depressing as fuck. The only part that is pleasant is Vanya's company, and we treat ourselves to a burger at a joint that's not as greasy as most fast food outlets are. When I have not had Vanya as my chauffeur to this soulless aspect of American life once a week, I rely on a weekly delivery of food I order online from Aldi, avoiding the trek up north because I do not own a car. I rely on a supermarket nearby that is overpriced as well, that I can walk to for a few items I need that Aldi's doesn't have.

Before long, Vanya will travel elsewhere and experience life in some European countries and in South America, before settling down somewhere permanently in retirement. And I'll go back to the non-car reliant existence I've had the 13 years I've lived in CU. It works for me.

A great deal of my idealism about what Alphistia would be like is based on everything wrong with the American experience. NYC's exuberant over-dense urban environment is atrociously planned, and not a model at all, and just about everywhere else in the country is so overly spread out it is unbelievably (and unsustainably) wasteful. And the psychological costs for everyone in this society are immeasurable (well, the statistics do show that America has a low life expectancy, 3-7 years lower than its peer countries in the OECD). Lifestyle and environment have plenty to do with those stats.

Alphistia would be "gezellig" in an Alphistian context. In other words, more like Holland than anything that the American Way of Life could offer. More on that to come soon…

Pushkin is Good

Pushkin is gezellig, that's for sure. He keeps me company each morning when I make my breakfast (and his!) He follows me around the house like a puppy all day, and he loves to take naps with me and spend most of the night curled up next to me in bed. What could be cozier than life with Pushkin? Thank goodness I found this boy in the parking lot 7 years ago 🙂

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